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Priests for Tomorrow

*A **discussion document**, prepared by parishioners of the Parish of the Immaculate Conception, Rosebank, Johannesburg, who are concerned about the availability of the sacraments, and in particular the celebration of the Eucharist for the faithful..... **tomorrow**.*

December 2006

**PARISH OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
ROSEBANK, JOHANNESBURG**

PRIESTS FOR TOMORROW

December 2006

We the parishioners of Rosebank are extremely concerned about the increasing shortage of priests in our diocese and in the wider church in the world. We see this as a long-term development, which has been taking place over decades, and a trend that is highly unlikely to change. One reads of some countries where the shortage of priests is so severe that many months pass before catholic communities are able to join in the celebration of the Mass.

Here in our own diocese, according to information obtained from the director of vocations in the diocese, the situation is:

- Of the 110 parishes in our diocese 15 are now sharing priests.
- Of the 45 diocesan priests, 10 - or nearly a quarter - are over 75, or retired, or involved in other ministries
- Of the 135 religious priests, 72 - or just over half - are over 75 or engaged in other ministries and not available for parish work.

By 2015, which is less than 10 years away, 71 of the 180 current priests in the diocese will be over 75. We currently have 15 seminarians, and it is hoped that 10 to 12 of these will proceed to ordination. Including the average 2 per year that will take up service after ordination, the community of priests who can be expected to serve in parishes is rapidly diminishing. We undoubtedly face a situation where we will have more and more laity and fewer and fewer priests.

As concerned members of the Church we respectfully wish to say to our bishops that we believe

- The Church has an obligation to make all the sacraments available to all its members. Indeed according to Canon Law, "Christ's faithful have the right to be assisted by their Pastors from the spiritual riches of the Church, especially the word of God and the sacraments" (*Canon Law 213*)
- The diocesan bishop in particular is "to strive constantly that Christ's faithful entrusted to his care grow in grace through the celebration of the sacraments, and may know and live the paschal mystery." (*Canon Law 387*)
- The Eucharist in particular is essential to the spiritual life of the Church, but can be administered only by an ordained priest who has the faculty of consecration
- It is obvious that the Church's ability to meet this obligation is under threat, due to the shortage of priests.

We the members of the Church are concerned about this and want to know what those in charge intend doing about the situation. In this process, the Pastoral Council and the parish of Rosebank believe they are acting fully within the dogmatic constitution and canon law of the Church as follows:

"The laity has the right, as do all Christians, to receive in abundance from their sacred Pastors the spiritual goods of the Church, especially the assistance of the Word of God and the sacraments." (*Lumen Gentium, 37*).

"Christ's faithful are at liberty to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their wishes to the Pastors of the Church." (*Canon Law 212.2*)

“According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right, and even at times the duty, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church, and to make their opinion known to the rest of Christ’s faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their Pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.” (*Canon Law 212.3*)

Our belief is that the traditional resources that supplied men for the priesthood are not able to supply for the needs of the growing body of the Church. Whilst we value the traditional vocation, it is the case that these are in decline. We can and do bemoan this fact, but in order to understand it we need to consider more carefully why it might be the case. We could say that ‘families do not do enough to encourage vocations’ or even that “God isn’t doing His bit to call enough priests’. These responses however, fail to consider the Church in the context of modern society. Our Church is the Church in the world, and this world has changed irrevocably, perhaps more in the last century, than in all of the previous nineteen of the Church’s history.

In pre-modern times, the Church provided not only a calling, but also a major and visible social institution in society. Within such an institution, the priest in any community would be a person of eminent authority, respect, education, relative prosperity and possibly even power. The structure of society as a whole reinforced both the priesthood and the church. This is not to say that priests were or are necessarily motivated by worldly considerations. But the priesthood could then be seen not only as a ‘vocation’ but a ‘career’ – of particular importance in societies with relatively simple economic structures and few opportunities for social mobility. Today the Church is but one of many institutions wielding power, there are many different career opportunities available (especially for educated people) and the relative authority, respect, education, prosperity and social position of the priest are substantially different from before. The pressures of modern times in fact reveal the essence of what priesthood must entail. With so many other motivations falling away, its chief feature – and its rewards - must surely be found in service, in and through the Church.

Having carefully considered the situation we believe that it is appropriate that the Church adopt new approaches to address its obligation to make the sacraments available to all its members. We believe that the three proposals below have merit and should be carefully considered as a matter of urgency, with a view to their possible adoption and implementation. These proposals are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

Proposal 1 - Traditional Vocations

Our first proposal is that we must, of course, pray for, promote and encourage vocations to the celibate priesthood. For hundreds of years the Roman Rite of the Church has relied on young men joining the priesthood to live a celibate life entirely devoted to the service of the Church. Celibacy should never be devalued. Even the Catholic Eastern Rite Churches, whilst providing for the ordination of certain married persons, continue to favour those priests who are celibate.

Despite the factors that mitigate the flow of vocations to the celibate priesthood, and perhaps because of these factors, we need to work much harder at creating the environment in our parishes and diocese in which vocations can be encouraged, fostered and developed. Prayers for an increase in vocations to the priesthood and for the inspiration to overcome this crisis in the Church need to become part of all of our daily lives through private prayer, at all of our Masses, through prayer groups and through Eucharistic Adoration services.

We need to promote good Christian practices in our homes such that vocations can develop and grow. Families need to become integrated and active participants in the life of the Parish, which in turn needs to provide families with opportunities to grow and develop their spirituality. The involvement of the youth in the life of the Parish needs to be encouraged, whilst also integrating our Catechetical instruction into the life of the Church. The Rosebank Parish Pastoral Council has

already appointed a Parish Vocations Sub-Committee for these purposes and to further develop innovative ideas and programmes to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life.

Likewise, the Diocese should be encouraged to consider adequately staffed Vocations and Youth offices which have the resources to arrange events on a Diocesan scale and which can service the parishes and schools adequately. This would include regular visits to the Catholic schools and other catechetical groups in parishes to promote and foster vocations, workshops, retreats, camps and visits to the seminaries. Vocations support groups need to be fostered and the needs of the Diocese with respect to vocations of various kinds need to be clearly enunciated.

Let them learn through unity and love what they may later proclaim through teaching.

Proposal 2 – Optional Celibacy

We respectfully suggest that the current discipline of priestly celibacy is restrictive and inconsistent within the Church. As noted by the National Council of Priests of Australia (2004) : “Across the world there are many hundreds if not thousands of Catholic Priests ordained and ministering within the Roman Rite who are married and continue to live out their marriages. Most of them are men who were previously ordained as ministers in other Christian traditions and who made decisions to become Catholics. With full approval of our Church, and following upon courses of formation and study agreed on by the ordaining Bishop, these men have been ordained and appointed to pastoral ministry. We welcome these brothers in Christ and their families.”

However this situation is clearly anomalous, and discriminates against Catholics who wish to be priests and be married. In addition to those exceptional married priests in the Roman Rite, there are many married priests in the Eastern Rites of the Catholic Church.

Individuals who have the gift of celibacy, or feel they can be determined enough to spend their lives in celibacy, are in possession of a vital attribute to be candidates for the priesthood in the Catholic Church. However, it would seem that many who enter the priesthood either did not have an enduring gift of celibacy or have lost their determination to be celibate. “Worldwide, since 1962, 110 000 priests have abandoned their vocation.”(Rev. Marx OSB) In addition, it is highly probable that there are large numbers of individuals who would wish to serve as priests, but know they do not possess the gift of celibacy, and are lost to the priesthood.

We suggest - as have the Australian Priests and many other Catholics across the world - that the Church needs to “examine honestly the appropriateness of insisting upon a priesthood that is, with very few exceptions, obliged to be celibate. Priesthood is a gift, celibacy is a gift: they are not the same gift.”

(National Council of Priests, Australia, 2004)

As a rider to this proposal, the readmission of priests who have been laicised because of their desire to marry could be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Proposal 3 – Ordained Community Leaders

Finally we wish to request that the Church earnestly and seriously consider extending the opportunity of ordination in the Roman rite to community leaders who fulfil all the qualifications St Paul lists in his instruction to Titus 1:5-9

“The reason I left you behind in Crete was for you to organise everything that still had to be done and appoint elders in every town, in the way that I told you, that is, each of them must be a man of irreproachable character, husband of one wife, and his children must be believers and not liable to be charged with disorderly conduct or insubordination. The presiding elder has to be irreproachable since he is God’s representative: never arrogant or hot-tempered, not a heavy drinker or violent, nor avaricious; but hospitable and a lover of goodness; sensible, upright, devout and self-controlled; and he must have a firm grasp of the unchanging message of the tradition, so that he can be counted on both for giving encouragement in sound doctrine and for refuting those who argue against it.”

Such ordained community leaders would administer sacraments and serve the Church, even while they remain engaged and productive members of the community at large.

These individuals would assist those ordained celibate priests whom we do have and, with the faculty they will possess to say Mass, ensure that members of the church will have access to the Eucharist and the celebration of the Mass in particular.

This concept is one that has been mooted since the Second Vatican Council, and indeed as a result of the recognition of the role of laity by the Council. However, thus far, the authorities in Rome have ignored this concept. Most recently, at the synod of bishops in Rome in 2005 to mark the Year of the Eucharist, the ordination of *viri probati* (men of proven virtue) was proposed as a Synodal proposition to be presented to the Pope. Regrettably, eight of the twelve working groups of Bishops present decided that the question should not be on the day’s agenda.

We strongly advocate that now is the time for the concept of ordained community leaders to receive serious consideration as a necessary solution for the provision of the sacraments to the members of the Church. **In particular we advocate the ordination of suitable community leaders because, of the three proposals in this paper, it is the one which can yield the quickest and most substantial results in the serious situation in which we find ourselves.**

Conclusion

In conclusion, with reverence to our pastors, and also mindful of our duty to our Church, and the Church that will belong to our children and grandchildren, we submit that these proposals receive serious consideration by all, especially those who are competent to adopt them.

“The old order changeth yielding place to new
and God fulfils himself in many ways,
lest one good custom should corrupt the world”

Tennyson.

Appendix One: Background

The short document, **Priests for Tomorrow**, has been developed as a lay initiative by the Parish Pastoral Council of the Parish of the Immaculate Conception, in Rosebank, Johannesburg.

The Parish Pastoral Council is deeply concerned about the growing shortage of priests in our diocese and in the wider world, and the consequent dangers to the full sacramental life of the People of God, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist. The problem seems self-evident when one observes the aging demographics of our priests, and the relatively small number of new priests being ordained.

This concern prompted the Pastoral Council to establish a Working Group to study the situation and, if possible, to develop a set of proposals to help address the problem. The Working Group's brief was to incorporate these proposals in a Memorandum to be considered by the parish at large and then, if it found sufficient support among parishioners, to submit it to the Bishop of Johannesburg for his consideration.

The Working Group proceeded by way of prayer, discussion, research, and consultations in the parish and also more widely.

As this was a lay initiative, our beloved parish priest, Father Harry Wilkinson, did not participate in the Group's meetings, but was kept informed of progress and received minutes of all its meetings.

Members of the Working Group met over a period of some months from April 2006 onwards.

On the Feast of Corpus Christi parishioners were informed about the Group's brief, and they were invited to make written submissions to assist it in its work. A good number of submissions were received. All were considered and accommodated in the final memorandum.

The Working Group was also supported in its task by the regular inclusion of a special prayer in the Prayers of the Faithful.

In due course a memorandum was developed, setting out four recommendations: (i) to support traditional vocations more vigorously; but in addition to consider (ii) optional celibacy; (iii) the recall of married priests; and (iv) the ordination of community leaders to administer the sacraments and serve the church, assisting ordained celibate priests.

The Parish Pastoral Council then called a General Meeting of the parish for 1 August 2006, to discuss the memorandum and seek the parish's endorsement. Prior to the general meeting, copies of the memorandum were distributed at all masses in the parish over the weekend of 22 and 23 July.

A special Novena was held before the general meeting to pray about the issue. In spite of bitter cold and rain, 120 parishioners attended the meeting.

Each of the proposals was discussed in open forum, after which support for each was measured by a show of hands¹. The proposal endorsing traditional celibate priesthood was supported unanimously, though there was some difference of opinion about how it should be worded. However, the parishioners did not see their support for the traditional celibate priesthood as

¹ *Optional celibacy* – for 92% (against 7%, abstained 1%); *Recall of married priests* – for 91% (against 8%, abstained 1%); *Ordained community leaders* – for 87% (against 7%; abstained 6%). During the discussion at the general meeting, a number of speakers addressed the question of women priests. This had not been specifically dealt with in the memorandum, though the concept of women being ordained community leaders was covered in proposal (iv). However, given the level of interest in, and apparent support for, women priests among the parishioners present, it was decided to measure the support for the idea by a show of hands. Some 80% of attendees at the general meeting supported the concept.

excluding the other options. All three of the other three proposals were also very strongly supported

The Parish Pastoral Council's Working Group then submitted the Memorandum, with supporting documentation, to His Grace Archbishop Buti Tlhagale, the Bishop of Johannesburg.

The Archbishop met with members of the Group on 12 September. While he noted a number of significant problems, he said that he welcomed the debate, and he encouraged the group to distribute the Memorandum widely – not only in the Deaneries of the Diocese of Johannesburg, but more broadly for discussion in other dioceses and at all levels in the Church in South Africa and Southern Africa, including the hierarchy.

His Grace's thinking in this regard is that it is important for all in the Church to confront, think seriously about and debate the issues that we face collectively in ensuring that there are 'Priests for Tomorrow' in sufficient numbers to serve the People of God and the wider world.

Appendix Two: Sources Consulted

A reading pack of the documents below was made available, at the presbytery, prior to the general meeting. Links to all the website references can be found on the parish website – www.catholic.co.za/parishes/rosebank

Book:

Lobinger and Zulehner (2004) *Priests for Tomorrow: A plea for teams of "Corinthian priests" in the parishes*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines.

Documents:

Irvine (2006) *The vocations crisis as a social phenomenon*, discussion document prepared for Rosebank Parish working group, www.catholic.co.za/parishes/rosebank

Lobinger & Zulehner (2003) *Priests for Tomorrow*, *The Tablet*, 15 February 2003, at www.thetablet.co.uk/articles/3670

Mickens (2005) *Rome Synod: the inside story*, *The Tablet*, 29 October 2005, at www.thetablet.co.uk/articles/755

Munks (2006) *Reflections of the use of married priests in the Catholic Church*, discussion document prepared for Rosebank Parish working group, www.catholic.co.za/parishes/rosebank

National Council of Priests, Australia (2004) *Reflections on the Lineamenta*, at www.ncp.catholic.org.au/members/NCP-reflectionsontheLineamenta.html

Rev. Marx OSB *The Collapse of Religious and Priestly Vocations* www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Faith/0304-96/vocations.html

Websites:

Canon Law: <http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/INDEX.HTM>

Corpus Christi Campaign: <http://www.futurechurch.org/fpm/corpus/index.htm>

Married Priests: www.Marriedpriests.org